

Zionism and Oriental Jews: a dialectic of exploitation and co-optation

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Abstract: Some recent accounts have sought to present Mizrahim – Jews whose origins are in Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa rather than in eastern and central Europe – as fellow victims of the Zionist project, along with Palestinian Arabs. On this view, Zionism is an essentially Ashkenazi (European Jewish) project. Here, a more complex account of Mizrahi identity in Israel is presented, showing how Jewish immigrants from Muslim countries, despite being regarded as culturally inferior and treated as colonisation fodder by the Zionist leadership, were nevertheless successfully co-opted to the Zionist project. The Mizrahim continue to face socio-economic disadvantages in Israel but these are predominantly a reflection of class barriers and are fundamentally distinct from the national oppression of Arabs.

Keywords: Ashkenazim, identity politics, integration of immigrants, Israeli racism, Mizrahim, Palestinian Arabs

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Race & Class

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10.1177/0306396808100153 <http://rac.sagepub.com>

In recent years, the complex relationship of the Mizrahim¹ to Zionism has been presented in an over-simplified way by some Israeli anti-Zionist Mizrahi activists and ideologues – including notably some social science academics – as well as by some Palestinian leftists. It has been claimed that Zionism is essentially a project of the Ashkenazim.² The implication is that the Mizrahim in Israel, far from sharing the blame for the iniquities of Zionism, are in fact its victims alongside the Palestinian Arabs. The main dividing line in Israel/Palestine is accordingly that between Ashkenazi-Zionist Orientalist oppressors and Oriental oppressed, the latter comprising both Mizrahi Jews and Palestinian Arabs.³

In this article, we argue for a far more nuanced view. The Zionist project was indeed initiated by Ashkenazim who were mostly infected by racist European ‘Orientalist’ attitudes and applied them to the Mizrahim, whom they treated with contempt, as mere instruments. However, the *response* to Zionism among Mizrahi communities before 1948 was not very different from that of Ashkenazi communities before the second world war. Mizrahi immigrants were imported to Israel as colonisation fodder. However, despite the subjective Orientalist racism of most veteran Zionist leaders, the objective logic of the Zionist project has eventually led to the co-optation of a substantial Mizrahi elite. Moreover, with the passage of time, the ethno-cultural aspect of the oppression of the Mizrahim – stressed by the Mizrahi identity ideologues – has gradually receded in importance, as compared with the socio-economic disadvantage of the Mizrahi masses.

‘Human dust’

In some sense, the claim that ‘Zionism is Ashkenazi’ is obviously correct: the Zionist project was initiated by Ashkenazim and the Zionist movement has been led predominantly – and, for quite a long time, almost exclusively – by Ashkenazim.⁴ It is also true that the attitude of the Zionist leaders to the Mizrahim tended to be overtly racist and instrumental. We need not expand on this here but instead refer the reader to the masterly materialist account by Raphael Shapiro.⁵ Let us just recapitulate briefly part of his account.

From its very early days, the Zionist project – aiming to displace the indigenous Palestinians – needed an alternative *Jewish* labour force. In a report commissioned by the Palestine Office of the Zionist movement (1908), one of its experts, Dr Jacob Thon, stated that ‘it is hardly in need of pointing out that the question of employing Jewish instead of Arab agricultural workers is one of the most important problems of the colonisation of Palestine’. This was to come from two sources: first, ‘from the Zionist youth in the Diaspora, especially from Russia’; second, ‘from among the [indigent] Oriental Jews, who are still on the same cultural

level as the [Arab] fellahin'. Those few thousand Mizrahim already living in Palestine at the time, 'especially the Yemenis and Persians', are suited for agricultural work. 'Since they are frugal, these Jews can be compared to the Arabs, and from this point of view they can compete with them.'⁶ In view of this report, the Palestine Office decided to import new Jewish immigrants from Yemen. These efforts were quite successful, in fact, all too successful: by 1912, the supply of Yemenite immigrants exceeded demand.⁷ However, eventually the expanding Zionist colonisation of Palestine, especially following the first world war and the Balfour declaration (1917), created a constant need for importing a Jewish labour force.

Following the creation of Israel (1948) and the massive ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian population from the areas it occupied in the 1947–9 war, the Zionist project's hunger for Jewish immigration intensified immeasurably. It was now driven not only by the political-economic aim of replacing Palestinian workers with Jews in pre-existing or projected jobs. A large number of new Jewish immigrants were needed urgently for political-demographic purposes: re-populating the newly occupied areas from which the Palestinian Arabs had been driven out, especially near the 1949 Armistice Lines ('the Green Line'), and thereby staking a de facto claim to these areas, establishing a Jewish majority in Palestine and supplying conscripts for the growing needs of the army. Europe provided one source: following the Nazi genocide, there were not only many Jewish refugees seeking permanent settlement but also other Jews who were not refugees but were traumatised by recent horrors and wished to leave Europe. But this reserve of immigrants was insufficient. Mizrahi Jews – mainly from Yemen, Iraq and North Africa – were seduced and encouraged to immigrate to Israel. In some cases, provocations (such as simulated anti-Semitic outrages) were allegedly staged in order to stimulate a mass Mizrahi exodus from Arab countries. These new immigrants were more or less dumped where political-demographic considerations dictated, without any real economic planning or productive employment. Mizrahi immigrants were subjected to racist treatment by the Zionist establishment (then dominated by 'labour' Zionism), many of whose members regarded them as mere 'human material', a faceless 'human dust', who ought to be grateful for being saved from Oriental backwardness. The next, Israel-born generation was to be moulded in the image of the 'Sabra' model.

By the way, an interesting observation made by Shapiro is that the Zionist definition of Israel as a state of all the world's Jews (rather than of its own citizens) makes it automatically an Ashkenazi state: the Ashkenazim are an overwhelming majority of world Jewry, although in Israel they are a minority of the population and barely a majority among its Jewish inhabitants.⁸

Mizrahi Zionism

In view of the facts described above, it may at first sight seem surprising that there has been little hostility or opposition to Zionism among Mizrahim, either in their countries of origin or following their mass migration to Israel. Before 1948, there were a few anti-Zionist voices raised in Mizrahi communities outside Palestine: those came mostly either from religious leaders or from members and supporters of communist parties. Many were not so much opposed to Zionism but resented it for putting them in a compromising position, suspected of dual loyalty. A small minority responded positively to Zionism, including some who actually migrated to Palestine quite voluntarily. But the great majority were simply indifferent.

Thus the Mizrahi response was not substantially different from that of the Ashkenazi communities before the 1940s. True, Zionism was initiated and led by Ashkenazim; but before the Nazi genocide it remained very much a minority movement in the Ashkenazi communities. There, too, it was actively condemned by most Orthodox and Reformist religious authorities, by supporters of the Jewish Socialist *Bund* and the communist parties, as well as by secular Jews who favoured assimilation. The majority there too were simply uninterested. The overwhelming majority of those east European Jews who wished to emigrate chose to go to the Americas, Australia, South Africa and western Europe rather than to Palestine.

According to official Israeli statistics, between 1919 and 14 May 1948, when the state of Israel was declared, over 420,000 Jews arrived in mandatory Palestine: 44,809 (10.4 per cent) came from Asia and Africa and 385,066 (89.6 per cent) came from Europe and America.⁹ Now, 10.4 per cent seems a rather small proportion of Jewish immigration to Palestine. But note that, before the Nazi genocide, the Mizrahim constituted roughly 7.5 per cent – considerably less than 10.4 per cent – of world Jewry.¹⁰ So, as far as immigration was concerned, Zionism in fact elicited a *proportionately greater* positive response among Mizrahi communities than among other Jews.¹¹

Mizrahim also played a considerable part in voluntary militant Zionist activism in pre-1948 Palestine. Precise data is hard to come by but the general picture that emerges from various sources (personal reminiscences, examination of name lists of persons involved in various activities) is fairly clear. In organisations affiliated to Labour ('socialist') Zionism, including the underground armed PALMAH,¹² Mizrahim were under-represented compared to their proportion in the Jewish population. Consequently, there were relatively few Mizrahim in the co-operative and collective agricultural settlements established by these movements. In the mainstream Zionist clandestine militia, the Haganah (precursor of the Israeli armed forces), the proportion of Mizrahim was roughly the same as in the Jewish population as a whole.¹³ On the other hand, Mizrahim were over-represented in

right-wing – and more extreme – Zionist organisations, including notably the clandestine armed ETZEL and LEHI.¹⁴ Of the twelve members of these two groups executed for terrorist acts during the British Mandate, only five were Ashkenazim.¹⁵

Mizrahi attitude to Zionism in Israel

After 1948, the mass immigration of Mizrahim to Israel was, for the main part, not motivated by Zionist commitment on the part of the immigrants; rather, it was a response to real or perceived menace in the countries of origin. In some Arab countries, notably Iraq, a feeling of panic was encouraged, if not actually created, by Zionist propaganda and the actions of Zionist agents.¹⁶

Yet Mizrahim in Israel have not shown any marked tendency to join or form anti-Zionist political groups. Among the small minority of Israeli Jews who are openly anti-Zionist, Mizrahim are not proportionately over-represented. In fact, the only numerically significant group of Mizrahim in anti-Zionist ranks were some immigrants from Iraq who had been members or supporters of the Iraqi Communist Party and who, upon arrival in Israel, transferred their allegiance to the Israeli CP. But this had little to do specifically with their being Mizrahim: a similar pattern existed also among new immigrants from eastern Europe who had supported the CPs in their countries of origin.

The discrimination and humiliation experienced by the Mizrahim in Israel led to disaffection, including occasional militant eruptions, beginning with widespread violent demonstrations of Yemenite immigrants in 1950, which, though widely reported at the time, are now almost forgotten.¹⁷ Better remembered are the Wadi Salib riots (July 1959), involving mostly North African immigrants.¹⁸ There were sporadic outbreaks in later decades.

Yet in all these Mizrahi social protests there was little or no attempt to connect the struggle of the Mizrahim for social equality with that of the Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel. The only partial exception was the Israeli Black Panther movement, which erupted in 1971 and whose initial slogans protested on behalf of 'all the downtrodden' – a coded reference to solidarity with the Palestinians. This stance – all the more remarkable for being exceptional – was no doubt largely due to the involvement of leftist militants, mainly members of the socialist anti-Zionist organisation *Matzpen*, who gave the Panthers some logistic and political support.¹⁹

On the whole, opposition to Zionism and solidarity with the Palestinian Arabs found little support among the Mizrahim: certainly no more than among other Israeli Jews. Meanwhile, the disaffection of the Mizrahim has been exploited by right-wing and religious Zionist parties that are noted for their extreme anti-Arab ideology and which have won a great deal of Mizrahi electoral support.

‘Arab Jews’?

The weakness of specifically Mizrahi opposition to Zionism and, especially, the almost total absence of solidarity with the Palestinian Arabs may seem strange in view of the fact that the Mizrahim are often labelled as ‘Arab Jews’. This terminology has been used especially by a few Mizrahi exponents of identity ideology but also in some Palestinian nationalist discourse.²⁰ The ideological motivation behind this is quite obvious. For the Mizrahi identity ideologues, this labelling helps to depict Palestinian Arabs and Mizrahi Jews as joint victims, counterposed to their Ashkenazi Zionist oppressors. For Palestinian nationalist supporters of the unitary ‘one state solution’, it serves to avoid the problem posed by the existence of a new Hebrew (Israeli-Jewish) nation and depicts the national character of the future unitary Palestine as predominantly Arab. Thus, in an authoritative programmatic article, ‘Towards the democratic Palestine’, published by Fatah in 1970, the author points out that ‘the call for a non-sectarian Palestine should not be confused with ... a bi-national state’.²¹ He goes on to claim that in the reality of Palestine ‘the term bi-national and the Arab-Jewish dichotomy [are] meaningless, or at best quite dubious’. This is so because ‘the majority of Jews in Palestine today are Arab Jews – euphemistically called Oriental Jews by the Zionists. Therefore Palestine combines Jewish, Christian and Moslem Arabs as well as non-Arab Jews (Western Jews).’²²

However, this labelling of Mizrahim as ‘Arab Jews’ is quite wrong. Of course, we are not questioning the right of any individual to *self-identify* as an Arab Jew if s/he feels inclined to do so. But there is no justification for thrusting this label upon the mass of Mizrahim, who do not choose to identify themselves as ‘Arab’ and who would, at best, regard this label as alien to their self-identity. For a start, the label ‘Arab’ makes no sense at all as far as some Mizrahi communities are concerned: for example, Iranian, Kurdish, south Indian and Bukharan Jews. These communities had little or nothing to do with the Arabic language and culture. But the label is also inappropriate for describing members of Jewish communities who lived in Arab countries, most (though not all) of whom did speak some Arabic dialect. These may be described as *culturally* Arabised but not as ‘Arab’ in any *national* or *ethnic* sense.²³

In Israel, the overwhelming majority of Arabic-speaking immigrants had an obvious reason to avoid being labelled as ‘Arabs’ and thus being automatically classified as part of the subordinate national group, hostile to the Jewish state. In struggling to improve their social status and economic conditions, Mizrahi immigrants were able to achieve some results by invoking Jewish solidarity and the Zionist claim that all Jews, wherever they are, constitute a single nation. In a colonising settler state, affinity with the indigenous people is quite undesirable.

But our main point has nothing to do with the racism of the Zionist state. The label ‘Arab’ is a grave anachronistic error when applied to the

mass of the Jews living in Arab countries *before* their emigration. The point is that 'Arab' as a national category, a label of national identity (as distinct from the Arabic language), is a relatively recent construct.²⁴ Most, if not all, Jews living, say, in Baghdad would describe themselves as 'Baghdadi' or perhaps 'Iraqi' Jews, or – stressing the antiquity of their community – as 'Babylonian' Jews. Similarly, members of the Jewish community in Fez would normally refer to themselves as 'Moroccan' or 'Mughrabi' Jews. It would simply not occur to them (with the possible exception of a very small number of individuals) to label themselves as 'Arab' Jews.²⁵ Indeed, it would have been bizarre for them to self-identify in that way, given that the majority of their *non-Jewish* compatriots did not normally apply the label 'Arab' to themselves at that time.

Arab national identity, first urged by a few intellectuals and political activists, was not widely adopted in the Arabic-speaking countries until well into the twentieth century. Towards the middle of the century, with the rise of secular Arab nationalism, it was gaining currency – alongside more local national identities, such as Iraqi, Egyptian, Algerian, etc.²⁶ However, the Jewish minorities in these countries did not participate in this process and kept, or were kept, outside the Arab nationalist movement.²⁷ To some extent, this was due to the lack of any serious attempt by the nationalist movement to attract Jews to its ranks. Zionist colonisation had led to an acute conflict in Palestine and most Arab nationalists eventually fell for Zionism's claim that it spoke and acted for all Jews. The Jewish minorities were thus regarded with suspicion as pro-Zionist and therefore disloyal.²⁸ This suspicion was compounded by the fact that the majority of the Mizrahi intelligentsia and the Jewish secular leadership in their countries of origin adopted western culture, usually that of the colonial power ruling their country. Thus Jews living in the Arab world neither shared, nor were encouraged to share, in the newly constructed Arab identity. By the time Arab national consciousness reached its high-water mark and achieved mass popularity, there were very few Jews left in the Arab countries.

In any case, there is no evidence that, when there were still large Jewish communities in the Arab countries, they generally regarded themselves, or were regarded by their non-Jewish compatriots, as Arabs. The label 'Arab Jews', as a *generally applicable* category, must therefore be dismissed as an anachronistic and purely ideological construct. Moreover, it is useless as an 'objective' sociological term because Mizrahi immigrants to Israel who had no Arabic cultural background have shared a similar social status with Arabic-speaking immigrants. In other words, there is no *sociologically meaningful* category in Israel that includes all Jews from Arabic-speaking communities but excludes all other Mizrahim, such as those of Kurdish or Iranian origin.

Partial integration

More than half a century has elapsed since the mass Mizrahi immigration to Israel. During that time, the situation of the Mizrahim in Israel has changed to a considerable extent. According to some social, cultural and political criteria, their position has significantly improved compared to the early decades – although they have by no means achieved equality with the Ashkenazim in these respects.

The Zionist promise to make Israel a Jewish ‘melting pot’, in which ‘blending of exiled communities’ (*mizzug galuyyiot*) would take place, has not proved to be an utterly empty slogan. Here it is very important to note that, while racist attitudes towards the Mizrahim have been widespread and endemic among the Ashkenazi elite (especially among the ‘left-wing’ or ‘labour’ Zionist leadership), there is nothing structurally inherent in the Zionist project itself that dictates or legitimises such attitudes. On the contrary: the logic of Zionist colonisation requires minimising internal ethnic antagonisms and maximising unity and solidarity within the settler nation – against the indigenous Palestinian victims of Zionist colonisation and the surrounding Arab world. It is in the interest of Zionism that Jewish racist attitudes and resentments – in so far as they exist and seek an outlet – be directed exclusively against Arabs, not against fellow Jews.

True, members of the racist Ashkenazi elite have found this ideal psychologically difficult to achieve due to the many elements of resemblance between Mizrahi culture (in the widest sense of this term) and that of the hated and despised Arabs. And this resemblance seemed even greater than it really was when viewed from a great cultural distance and from the height of social arrogance. However, the more astute members of the elite eventually realised that it was politically expedient to try to overcome this psychological difficulty. Moreover, as we shall see, the difficulty itself has tended to diminish with the passage of time.

Arguably the greatest integrationist success has been the co-optation of Mizrahim into the military and political ruling Israeli elite. (In Israel, high military rank is quite often a stepping stone to a political career.) This process accelerated after 1977 (with the first Likud-led government) and especially after the rise of the religious SHAS party (founded in 1984), which has won large electoral support among Mizrahim. Thus, among chiefs of staff of the Israeli armed forces – the highest military position – were Moshe Levy (born in Israel, parents born in Iraq), Shaul Mofaz (born in Iran) and Dan Halutz (born in Israel, father born in Iran, mother in Iraq).

Mizrahim who have held prominent political positions include Professor Shlomo Ben-Ami (formerly Shlomo Ben-‘Abu, born in Morocco; foreign minister, minister of internal security), General Binyamin (Fuad) Ben-Eli‘ezer (born in Iraq; deputy prime minister, minister of defence, Labour Party chairman), Rabbi Aryeh Der‘i (born in Morocco; minister of

internal affairs), Dalia Itzik (born in Israel, parents born in Iraq; speaker of the Knesset), General Avigdor Kahalani (born in Israel, of Yemeni origin; minister of internal security), Moshe Katsav (born in Iran; president of the state of Israel, deputy prime minister), David Levy (born in Morocco; deputy prime minister, foreign minister), General Shaul Mofaz (born in Iran; minister of defence), General Yitzhak Mordechai (born in Iraqi Kurdistan; deputy prime minister, minister of defence), Yitzhak Navon (born in Palestine, to Sephardi father and mother of Moroccan origin; president of the state of Israel, deputy prime minister), 'Amir (Armand) Peretz (born in Morocco; minister of defence, Labour Party chairman, chairman of the Histadrut), Silvan Shalom (born in Tunisia; deputy prime minister, foreign minister, minister of the treasury), Meir Shitrit (born in Morocco; deputy prime minister, minister of internal affairs, minister of the treasury).²⁹

Israel has yet to elect a Mizrahi prime minister but, in recent years, the number of Mizrahi ministers in Israeli governments has tended to correspond roughly to the proportion of Mizrahim in the Jewish population. (This is true of Mizrahi *men*: Israeli women – Ashkenazi and Mizrahi alike – are still very seriously under-represented at the top and may rightly envy the Mizrahi men's achievements in this respect.) There are also quite a few Mizrahi mayors of towns and cities, including some that were established long before 1948 and the wave of Mizrahi immigration.

A considerable degree of cultural integration has also taken place. As time goes on, the descendants of the original Mizrahi immigrants tend to lose touch with their ancestral language and culture. By the third generation (grandchildren of the immigrants, or children of those who immigrated when very young), that cultural heritage has largely faded away. Significantly, this is true also of Mizrahi immigrants who were settled in towns where a part of the former Palestinian Arab population remained after 1948 (when the majority of that population was ethnically cleansed). In these mixed towns – such as Jaffa, Acre, Ramleh and Lydda – the proximity of indigenous Arabic speakers did little to preserve an Arabic culture among the immigrants.

This is not only due to imposition and pressure by the Ashkenazi elite. In fact, it is a normal process in most countries of immigration; and a similar process has taken place also among the Israeli Ashkenazim (except the ultra-orthodox).³⁰ Few members of the third generation of any ethnic origin speak the language of their grandparents. They speak Hebrew and even the specific ethnic accents, which are still clearly discernible in the second generation, tend to fade away in the third. A new national Hebrew culture has emerged, partly a synthesis of the diverse immigrant ethnic cultures, partly home-grown and partly imported from the global cultural marketplace. Inter-marriage among the communities has also contributed to this blending.

If many aspects of Israeli culture are more 'European' than 'Oriental', this is largely due to global 'western' importation rather than to the input of the ancestral Ashkenazi cultures. The privileged political, commercial and cultural relations that Israel has developed with the European Union (without any noticeable objection by Mizraḥim) has surely affected this. Indeed, Israel has been granted the status of an 'honorary' European country: for over thirty years, it has been welcome as a participant in European sports tournaments and championships, as well as in the annual Eurovision song contest, which it has won three times. As it happens, the three winners were Mizraḥim (all three of Yemenite origin): Yizhar Cohen in 1978, *Milk and Honey* with Gali 'Atari as the lead singer in 1979 and the transsexual Dana International (born Yaron Cohen) in 1998. This illustrates the fact that, in some aspects of the new national culture, the Mizraḥi contribution is more dominant than the Ashkenazi. This is true of popular music, a significant part of which has a Mediterranean character, and perhaps even more so of popular cuisine: Middle-Eastern dishes are far more common than traditional Ashkenazi ones.

Some cultural differences have persisted but they have a less pronounced ethnic character and are more a matter of degree. The most important cultural difference is perhaps in matters of religion: the Mizraḥim are relatively under-represented in the two extreme parts of the spectrum – secular and orthodox – and over-represented in the moderately religious middle. The various communities have kept their separate synagogues and their variants of religious liturgies, practices and customs. Israel has two Chief Rabbis: one for the Ashkenazim and one for the Sephardim and Mizraḥim. The Mizraḥim also have their own religious political party, SHAS, the only predominantly Mizraḥi party to have won mass support.

Other cultural differences are associated with socio-economic differences (discussed below): Mizraḥi ingredients are more evident in the subculture of the poor and working class, whereas the middle-class subculture is more influenced by western (though not specifically Ashkenazi) elements.

Socio-economic stratification

The foregoing is however only part of the story; the total picture is by no means as rosy as that account may have suggested. For a better balance, we must turn our attention to the class aspect of the position of Mizraḥim in Israel. This subject deserves an article in its own right; here we can only touch on it very briefly.

While its Mizraḥi members now comprise a sizeable proportion of the Israeli political elite, they constitute a very thin upper stratum of the Mizraḥi population as a whole. According to social, educational and economic criteria, this population is, on average, significantly disadvantaged

compared to the Ashkenazim. True, the Mizraḥim no longer provide the bulk of the very bottom of the labour market, as they did in the 1950s and 1960s. Following the 1967 war, during the 1970s and 1980s, they were replaced in the most menial and lowest-paid jobs by Palestinian workers. Since the late 1980s, following the first Palestinian intifada, the latter were largely excluded and have in turn been replaced by migrant foreign workers. During the 1990s, there was also an important demographic change in Israel's Jewish population: a large influx of immigrants from Russia and Ethiopia, who entered some of the lower ranks of the labour market (just above migrant foreign workers). This somewhat improved the relative position of the Mizraḥim. By now, many of the Russian immigrants have leapfrogged the Mizraḥim and enjoyed rapid upward mobility. However, not only most of the Ethiopian immigrants but also some of the Russians are still employed in semi-skilled low-paid jobs. Thus, the latter constitute a stratum of Ashkenazi workers who are socio-economically disadvantaged.

A few Mizraḥim – such as Šadiq Bino and Shlomo Eliahu (both from Iraq), Lev Leviev (from Bukhara), the Nimrodi family (originally from Iraq) and Itzhak Teshuvah (from Libya) – have joined the Israeli super-rich. Many more have acquired small businesses or managed to enter various middle-class occupations. Nevertheless, the overall socio-economic and educational gap between Mizraḥi and Ashkenazi Jews has remained very wide and appears to be narrowing very slowly, if at all. The reasons for this are quite clear. They have less to do with present-day *active* discrimination – there is considerably less of this than in the early decades – and more to do with low trans-generational socio-economic mobility (which is typical of many capitalist countries). In other words, it is mainly a persisting effect of the original active discrimination practised in Israel's early decades: the initial advantages and disadvantages tend to be inherited by successive generations. Thus, with the passage of time, the balance of the grievance felt by the majority of ordinary Mizraḥim has shifted. Cultural humiliation, a feeling that they and their specific ethnic cultures are despised by an alien ruling political elite, does persist but is of less central importance. Of relatively growing importance is a feeling of socio-economic discrimination, of being stuck at the bottom of the (Jewish) heap in consequence of being of the 'wrong' ethnic origin.

Political assessment

Mizraḥi identity discourse, like that of other identity ideologies, raises very real and important issues. But these issues can be conceptualised and theorised in politically progressive or not so progressive ways – depending on how they are articulated with questions of class, on the one hand, and of colonising national oppression on the other. Painting a picture that puts Ashkenazi Zionists on one side of the main dividing line

and on the other side lumps together as co-victims Palestinian Arabs and Mizrahim, irrespective of class, is a travesty.

Reality is far more complex than this simplistic picture. A Mizrahi senior cabinet minister is not in the same boat as a Mizrahi worker living in a depressed 'development township'. Nor is the latter in the same position *vis-à-vis* the Zionist project as a Palestinian worker or peasant. The difference is not merely that of degree but a decisive qualitative one. Zionism excludes the Palestinian Arabs as the absolute 'others', some of whom may at best be tolerated as second-class citizens as long as they remain a docile minority, and all of whom are under the constant threat of being ethnically cleansed whenever the opportunity arises. The Mizrahim were recruited to replace the Palestinians, and are theoretically embraced by Zionism as brethren, although in practice most of them were placed in inferior positions.

The extent to which Mizrahim in present-day Israel can be regarded as victims of the Zionist regime is strongly class-dependent. Indeed, as we saw, a Mizrahi elite has been co-opted and successfully integrated into Israel's military and political leadership. For the mass of the Mizrahim, socio-economic deprivation is increasingly the central issue. Issues of cultural discrimination, being subjected to contemptuous or patronising Ashkenazi attitudes, while still very much alive, are gradually becoming less relevant as a distinct issue and tend to become an aspect of class-based cultural antagonism.

Moreover, even the most deprived Mizrahi is hugely privileged, as a member of the dominant oppressing nation, compared to a Palestinian Arab of similar socio-economic status in Israel – let alone in the West Bank or Gaza. The Mizrahim in Israel are indeed an under-privileged group – but only in the sense of being a *relatively* under-privileged part of the oppressor settler nation. There is a qualitative difference between their position and that, say, of the descendants of the African slaves in the US, who really had no share whatsoever in the responsibility for the settlers' oppression and genocide of the native Americans.

The idea of basing an alliance between the Mizrahim and the Palestinians on the grounds of their being fellow 'Orientals' or Arabs, as opposed to the Ashkenazim, who are to blame for Zionism, is a pure fantasy. It is not based on any reality that exists or is ever likely to exist even under greatly changed regional conditions. Rather, the struggle of the ordinary, socio-economically disadvantaged Mizrahim for their rights and against the racism of which they are victims must be an explicit and distinct but integral component of a general struggle for equal rights and social justice for all: encompassing workers' industrial actions, social struggles for better housing, education and health, civil society's campaigns for human rights and against any discrimination of minorities, and even for a better environment. All these issues are in the interests of ordinary Mizrahim no

less, and it seems even more, than pure cultural identity issues, let alone those based on a false analysis.

JUNE 2008

References

- 1 Broadly speaking, the Mizrahim – the term is Hebrew for Orientals – are Jews belonging to, or originating from, communities that have lived for several centuries in Muslim countries. They should not be – but often are – confused with the Sephardim: Jewish communities originating from the Iberian peninsula, from which they were expelled at the end of the fifteenth century by the Catholic Kings. Those Sephardim who migrated to Mediterranean Muslim countries lived there alongside Mizrahi communities and partly merged with them but largely preserved their distinct cultural identity and Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) language.
- 2 Broadly speaking, the Ashkenazim – the term is Medieval Hebrew for Germans – are Jews belonging to, or originating from, Yiddish-speaking communities that lived in Central and Eastern Europe.
- 3 For a recent typical example of this kind of narrative by an Israeli, see Smadar Lavie, 'Colonialism and imperialism: Zionism', in the *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*, Vol. 6 (Leiden, Brill, 2007). A seminal text in this line of narrative is Ella Shohat, 'Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the standpoint of its Jewish victims', *Social Text* (Nos. 19/20, 1988), pp. 1–35. For a Palestinian Leftist acceptance of this claim, see 'Adel Samara, 'Why the socialist solution in Palestine: and why the secular democratic state will serve the Zionist and Arab comprador solution'', *Kana'an e-Bulletin* (Vol. 8, no. 1592, 2008), <<http://www.kanaanonline.org/articles/01592.pdf>>.
- 4 We are speaking here of Zionism in the proper sense: the political movement that arose at the end of the nineteenth century – not of earlier Jewish messianic movements that are sometimes described as 'proto-Zionist'. Of these, the two most important ones were led by non-Ashkenazim: David Alroy (twelfth century) was an Iraqi Jew and Shabbetai Tzvi (seventeenth century) was a Romaniot (member of the ancient Greek Jewish community).
- 5 Raphael Shapiro, 'Zionism and its Oriental subjects', *Khamsin* (No. 5, 1978), pp. 5–26; reprinted in Jon Rothschild, ed., *Forbidden Agendas* (London, Saqi Books, 1984), pp. 23–48. By recommending Shapiro's article we do not imply that we agree with everything he says. A more impassioned but analytically far less rigorous account is given by Shohat, op. cit., who totally ignores Shapiro's earlier article.
- 6 Alex Bein, *Toldot Ha-Hityashvut Ha-Tzionit* [*History of the Zionist Colonisation*] (Tel-Aviv, Massada, 1970), pp. 97–8, quoted by Haim Hanegbi, 'Hatteymanim' ['The Yemenites'], *Matzpen* (No. 58, 1971), <<http://www.matzpen.org/index.asp?p=Temanim>>, and by Shapiro, op. cit. Shohat, op. cit., also quotes Thon (whose name she misspells as 'Tehon').
- 7 In the event, the immigrants from Yemen did not quite fulfil the hopes of the Palestine Office. They were mostly artisans, unused to agricultural labour, and were unable to compete with the indigenous Palestinians employed by Jewish colonists. The Palestinians were themselves peasants, for whom wage labour was a supplementary source of income and so could manage even if employed for very low wages. The Yemenites had no other source of income, yet were expected to work for the same low wages. This created great poverty and distress; the women were forced to work as domestic servants for the colonists and the children had to start working from an early age.
- 8 Shapiro, op. cit., pp. 19–20.
- 9 Government of Israel, *Statistical Abstracts* (Jerusalem, Central Bureau of Statistics, 1967); quoted by Moshe Behar, 'Palestine, Arabized-Jews and the elusive consequences

- of Jewish and Arab national formations', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* (No. 13, 2007), p. 585.
- 10 See Sergio DellaPergola, 'Demography' in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Philadelphia, Coronet Books, 2006), table 2.
- 11 True, not all Mizrahi immigrants were Zionists: some must have immigrated to Palestine out of other motives. But the same must be true, to at least the same extent, also of Ashkenazi immigrants, especially after the rise of fascism and Nazism in Europe.
- 12 Acronym for Plugot Maḥatz ('Strike Companies').
- 13 During the first three months of the 1947–49 war (30 November 1947–29 February 1948) – that is, well before the state of Israel came into existence – 378 Jews, all volunteers, were killed in active service, of whom 73 (19.3 per cent) were Mizraḥim according to their biographies in the official memorial site of Israel's Ministry of Defence, <<http://www.izkor.gov.il>>.
- 14 Acronyms, respectively, for Irgun Tzva'i Le'umi ('National Military Organisation') and Loḥamei Herut Israel ('Combatants for Israel's Liberty'). Both were described as 'terrorist' by the British Mandate authorities. LEHI – also known as the 'Stern Gang' – described *its own* activities as 'terroristic' in a notorious document in which it offered to collaborate with the Third Reich: see Lenni Brenner, ed., *51 Documents: Zionist collaboration with the Nazis* (Fort Lee, NJ, Barricade, 2002), p. 302. Ya'akov Bannai (Mazal), *Ḥayyalim Almonim: Sefer Mivtza'ei LEHI* [*Anonymous Soldiers: the book of LEHI operations*] (Tel-Aviv, Hūg Yedidim, 1958), lists 119 LEHI members killed in action, of whom 34 (28.5 per cent) may be identified by their names as Mizraḥim.
- 15 See <<http://tinyurl.com/yrvlsf>>.
- 16 See Abbas Shibliak, *Iraqi Jews: a history of mass exodus* (London, Saqi Books, 2005).
- 17 The first outbreak was in the 'Ein-Shemer immigrant camp on 14 February 1950. This soon spread to other camps of immigrants from Yemen: Beit-Lid, Rosh-Ha'ayin and Be'er-Ya'akov. The outbreaks kept erupting sporadically until the end of May and approached the scale of an uprising, suppressed by large police forces. On 8 April, the immigrant Salem ibn-Salem Ya'qub Jarafi was shot dead by a guard. There was another outbreak on 25 October 1952 in the Yemenite transit camp in 'Emeq Hefer (Wadi Hawarith). After a force of twenty-five policemen had been attacked and forced to leave the camp, the police reacted as an army of occupation: 200 policemen, armed with batons and seven rifles, encircled the camp in the early morning, declared a curfew in Hebrew and Arabic and then made house-to-house searches for suspects. Initially, 450 men were arrested, of whom 105, including thirteen soldiers on leave, were detained; thirty-nine suspects – 'mostly Yemenites, the rest Iraqis and Persians' – remained in custody after questioning (see *Ha'aretz*, 27 October 1952).
- 18 See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wadi_Salib_events>.
- 19 This involvement was widely reported and somewhat sensationalised by the Israeli press. Thus, for example, a headline in *Ha'aretz* of 3 March 1971: 'Jerusalem police arrested 13 youths known as "Black Panthers" and members of Matzpen'. See also *Yedio'ot Aharonot* of 4 March 1971. A leading article by Uri Avnery in *Ha'olam Hazeḥ* of 19 May 1971 excoriates *Matzpen* for trying to manipulate the Panthers and foster the dangerous illusion that the struggle of the Mizraḥim is going to overthrow Zionism.
- 20 For a typical example, see Samia Dodin and Sami Shalom Chetrit, *Culture, Identity and Borders: Samia Dodin, a Palestinian American, interviews Israeli poet and author Sami Shalom Chetrit on Israel and Arab Jewish identity* (2004), <<http://tinyurl.com/5288va>>. Lavie, op. cit., speaks of 'the first wave of Arab Jewish labor migration from Yemen to Palestine' in 1882.
- 21 'Towards the democratic Palestine', *Fateh* (Vol. 2, no. 2, 1970). Probably authored by Nabil Sha'ath. *Fateh* was the English-language newspaper published by the Information Office of the Palestine Liberation Movement.
- 22 By the way, the claim that a majority of Israeli Jews are Mizraḥim, which was correct in 1970, has often been repeated by various authors long after it ceased to be true due

to the immigration to Israel of about a million Jews from the former Soviet Union. By 2000, only 47 per cent of all Israeli Jews were Mizrahim: see Sergio DellaPer-gola, “‘Sephardic and Oriental’ Jews in Israel and western countries”, in Peter Y. Med-ding, ed., *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, No. 22: *Sephardic Jewry and Mizrahi Jews: Vol. XXII* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2008).

- 23 Thus Behar, op. cit., is correct in referring to them as ‘Arabized Jews’ in this cultural sense.
- 24 In traditional Arabic discourse, the term ‘Arab’ had quite a different connotation from its modern national sense. Thus the translator of the *Muqaddimah*, the monumental fourteenth century sociological work by the great Ibn Khaldūn, notes: ‘As a sociological term, “Arab” is always synonymous with “Bedouin, nomad” to Ibn Khaldūn, regardless of racial, national or linguistic distinctions.’ Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: an introduction to history: Vol. I* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 250. Five centuries later, the term ‘Arab’ was still used to describe the Arab Bedouin tribes (by others and by themselves). The rest of the Arabic-speaking masses normally self-identified according to their locality or religious community. See Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: from triumph to despair* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003).
- 25 An extreme special case is that of the Algerian Jews, who were granted French citizenship in 1870 under the *décrets Crémieux*. Although indigenous Algerians, the vast majority regarded themselves as French, took no part in the Algerian liberation struggle, and finally – like the European colonists – chose to leave en masse.
- 26 See Dawisha, op. cit.
- 27 What we say here applies at least to the vast majority of Jews in Arab countries. This was in stark contrast to the important role played by their Christian compatriots in the Arab nationalist movement, as well as to the significant participation of Jews in the Communist Parties in several Arab countries, principally Iraq and Egypt.
- 28 Behar, op. cit., p. 591f, is right in contending ‘that in so doing such Arab nationalists effectively embraced the Zionist conflation between Judaism and Zionism’. He is right in pointing out that in principle the Arab nationalists could have made a different choice.
- 29 In this list, only the most senior positions held by each person are mentioned. ‘Amir Peretz was succeeded as chairman of the Histadrut – a key political position – by ‘Ofer ‘Eini (father born in Iraq, mother in Libya).
- 30 By the way, the ancestral Yiddish language and culture of the Ashkenazim were also frowned upon and disparaged by the Zionist leadership.